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ESTHETIC VALUES AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

THE paper of Mr. Pepper on a point in esthetics¹ raises a number of questions that would be interesting to discuss at length. The following remarks are not offered as such a discussion and no more is claimed for them than that they happen to be my opinions at present.

Mr. Pepper puts excellently the contrast between esthetic criticism and scientific formulation. Any critical estimate involves so much of the critic's personal equation, Mr. Pepper thinks, that it tends to be the reverse of scientific; it is not disinterested nor dispassionate. We should be suspicious of sweeping judgments in esthetic criticism. But in science just the opposite is true, "where the more universal the law, the more valuable." The critical method of approach is, therefore, not a suitable method for a science of esthetics.

This is nearly all true, but, I suspect, not for the reasons Mr. Pepper has in mind. I agree that the method of "criticism" is not scientific; I agree, moreover, that it can not possibly be made so, no matter how disinterested and dispassionate the critic might be. But that is not because critical judgments are affected by a personal equation, which, perhaps, they usually are. It is because the judgment of criticism deals with an individual in its uniqueness, while a judgment of the scientific type deals with a universal, *i.e.*, with something intended to be applicable to as many individuals as possible.

I am assuming, I think with Mr. Pepper, that criticism aims to make us well acquainted with particular works, to bring us close to them so that we not only recognize what they may have in common with other works, but perceive also what is not duplicated anywhere, unless it be in perfect copies. I do not claim that all criticism has this function, but for the present I refer to the kind that does have it. And this kind of criticism does seem to care only or chiefly about the individual and to be indifferent to the type. And if the essence of science is to be capable of statement in laws which are not imaginary universals, but which convey a knowledge of certain constant and repeating details of nature, criticism evidently can not be scientific.

We can describe the nature of horses, and the nature of tuberculosis, but what exists are individual horses and individual sick people. This, I suppose, is the natural subject matter of any science of horses or science of medicine. One horse is, to be sure, like another and yet just those respects in which one horse is not like another

¹ "A Suggestion Regarding Esthetics," this JOURNAL.

may be what "makes all the difference." In ethics rules are important, but we say often that a case must be judged on its own merits. A science of ethics, however, must consist of rules or other general statements. Yet, surely, a science of ethics exists, or ought to exist, for the sake of its natural subject matter, just those individual cases that may show all manner of departure from type or complication of type.

The phraseology of universals is no less essential to philosophy than it is to science (admitting, for the moment, a difference). But what is passed over is ignored just because it is not found in all members of the type; and how significant or valuable this may be in concrete human experience can be decided only by some other manner of approach. Any method, then, which aims at propositions intended to be true of indefinitely many individuals must leave unnoticed more or less of the actual content which another method concerned with one thing at a time might pay full attention to. And a science of esthetics, if a science at all, would be like other science in this respect.

Is, then, a science of esthetics impossible? Candidly, I don't know, but I suspect it is; or, perhaps, I would prefer to say that we already have it in the only sense that is worth insisting upon. For the sake of what fruits would a science of esthetics exist? What is its natural subject matter? Again I am not sure that I know, or rather I would say that it may have various fruits and be about a variety of things. That is a verbal matter; and provided the questions studied are not artificial questions, and the discussions not confused by misunderstanding, it is a matter of no great consequence. If, however, the study of esthetics is to lead us to esthetic education, to experience marked by the possession of fine and organized esthetic values, and the constant activity of trained and discriminating senses, its purpose is not to lead us to something scientific in the sense above indicated, but to the unique individual, to something not defined but perceived.

What escapes definition and coherent description in any work of art is precisely what is unique, interesting, and possibly most valuable. A work that has none of this is "academic"; it embodies the rules and nothing else. We might propose as a definition of the academic: That which is made according to a rule—where the rule is more obeyed than used. Of course, a science of esthetics may aim to give us the academic, and perhaps it can not do anything else, unless we consider that it should be a body of information useful in producing esthetically valuable objects. But such objects are, of course, individual, and a great deal of technical, scientific knowledge is required for their production. Consider what an architect

needs to know, or a capable composer. A vast amount of science is necessary that the world may contain what we call works of art. It does not occur to anyone to say that this knowledge constitutes a science of esthetics, but, after all, why should we not say so? It is, at least, the effective knowledge that is indispensable if what we call art is to be systematically created.

And now I come to Mr. Pepper's "suggestion," viz., that the esthetic object as such is one that is liked without reference to any utility and, perhaps, in spite of it. As Mr. Pepper rightly says, the contrast between "intrinsic" value and valuable instrumentality, or to use an old and honest pair of terms, between beauty and use, is one of the commonplaces of the subject. But we have not yet seemed to get anywhere from this point of departure. If the distinction is to bear any fruit, it must be interpreted.

In this conceptual formulation, the beautiful and the useful are very sharply discriminated, and if one is still at the dialectical stage, it may seem that beauty and use must be separated in fact as they are in definition. The experience of so many of us in finding art only in museums is very misleading. Many, at least, of the treasures of the great galleries were produced to be a part, and perhaps a very important part of a church. An altar piece, on the altar where mass is said, may or may not be beautiful, but while in its original position it is preëminently "useful"; subsequently removed to a museum, its utility is lost and its beauty and lack of use characterize what is now classified as a work of art. Surely the problem of our day is how to overcome the separation—how to promote a demand that utilities shall be appropriately esthetic, and how to make esthetic value pervade common things and their use, not artificially and self-consciously, but simply and spontaneously. What knowledge is it that will help us to do this? I can not think it is any science of esthetics as we are inclined to use that word, but also, I repeat, I can not see why we should not call esthetic science all that science that an artist in one field or another must have if his genius is to have tools to work with. The same science may be used for other ends, but what of it?

Thus far, I have spoken as though in esthetics one were always dealing with art. That is as false as anything can be. I suppose a new wire fence is usually a thing of esthetic delight to the farmer who has just set it up. A good cow, a strong horse, a favorite tennis racquet, are likely to be objects of esthetic affection. I hope I may be pardoned for suggesting again ² a translation of the beauty-utility distinction into slightly different terms.

² Cf. Some passages in an article entitled "Value and Causality," this JOURNAL, Vol. 15, No. 4, p. 85.

Utility considers effects to be produced; it, therefore, envisages the future. A type of value that is quite independent of consequences will presumably be an interest in a present; witness the eloquent conclusion of Pater's fine book, *The Renaissance*. The present and the future are both objects of concern, and the future is something to be concerned about, because, sooner or later, it will not be future any longer but present, and life or experience is always in a present. If the present is always *merely* a scaffolding for the future, if it never has any value of its own, life can not be said to have much success. Let the success of the present be all in dreams of the future—that is indeed often the noblest and happiest present—but all the present moments of any man make up all of that man's life. If it were not for time and the future, I do not see how there could be any such thing as consequences or instrumentality in the natural sense. From this point of view, all values of the present are esthetic values whether they pertain to works of art or to anything else, and all values actually attained are attained in a present.

The translation of the beauty and use contrast into the temporal contrast of present and future is not advanced here as of any importance, least of all as of any importance for esthetics; but it may be interesting nevertheless. Of that the reader must judge; he should remember, too, that such contrasts are likely to be discriminations in analysis and not separations in fact. Whether or not the temporal contrast is significant for esthetics, it is fundamental in morals, in life. The puritan moralist despises the lover of beauty because he lives too much in a present. The lover of beauty dislikes the moralist who impoverishes life by postponing the enjoyment of its fruits. To each of these the word "good" has a different meaning. To a certain extent we could translate beauty and use into another contrast, the individual and the group. No such translation should be overworked or regarded as absolute, but with this proviso any such translation, if based upon empirical relations, is likely to clarify more or less.

Why should a distinction that has proved so barren as the distinction of the useful and the valuable useless nevertheless persist? While the distinction as phrased may be too much in terms of a logical antithesis, it may yet represent something that is both real and important. I think Mr. Pepper is right in indicating the distinction as important, not as a dialectical major premise, but as a point of departure, as something to interpret in terms of relevant experience. So much tragedy in life is produced by esthetic appeals to the soul, and so much dignity by other esthetic appeals. Fruits ripen, if you like, in the future but they are enjoyed in the present; and when they belong to what we call the past, it is the present that they

brighten or stain, and the future that they influence. And when we say they influence the future, we mean that they influence a present yet to come. As I have said the temporal contrast may not be very relevant, if terms are used absolutely, but it is a distinction that all empirical moralists and all directors of conduct must, one may suppose, have to make continually.

And now, if I seem to abandon what I have so labored to express, that, perhaps, only illustrates my thesis that life is continuous and one moment plays into another, but that one moment may be distinguished from another. Interpret the distinction of beauty and use in some other way; interpret it in as many ways as possible, since any interpretation is the noticing of some feature or some relation in what is subtle and interesting.

In nature no factor is more important than the factor of time, but of this logic takes hardly any account; and though time is an important term in physics, it is so in a sense very different from that which gives it such a rôle in the literature of human feeling. The arithmetic of life insurance companies brings us closer to what time means to those that live and grow old and to those that write history; to those, too, who have inherited the patrimony our ancestors achieved.

For, in any case, the depth and solidity of the esthetic factor in a person's life depend very much upon what kind of a world he is permitted to live in, depend, that is, greatly upon the degree to which normal and sharable esthetic values have been brought into a heritage for him or her by the past. A world rich in what is dignified, simple and beautiful may not be more "useful" than another in the usual sense of that now somewhat unhappy word, but it is a great deal better. And in the larger sense of the word, and the truer one, it is supremely useful, since it perpetuates itself. To possess this patrimony and to transmit it with the addition of what we have made it yield, not as a dead past but as something that binds one generation to another and makes a single life out of the lives of many men or of many nations, to hold together a community of the spirit, not merely in space but in time, seems to me a large part of what we may reasonably call our esthetic responsibility, something that the study of esthetics ought to encourage and promote.

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